

7-004 1966 Gypsy Liaison Office
Letter

Greenways
Knockholt
near Sevenoaks
Kent

October 18th., 1966

Dear Ruth Speyer,

I've sat down straight after our telephone conversation to write and tell you something about the Gypsy movement and about ourselves and what we're doing.

At the moment we are living in a trailer caravan in a lane on land belonging to Lord Stanhope, arch enemy of Gypsy people in this part of Kent. His gamekeeper discovered us last week and we expect the police to arrive any minute. However, we are not too worried about this having been evicted many times before while living in Ireland.

We have just come back from a brief visit to France, as I mentioned, and went over to be at the baptism of Manuel, son of Vanko Rouda, secretary of the international committee. We are Manuel's 'parents of honour' according to Romani custom and thus have a special link with Vanko's family.

While in Paris we attended a meeting of the committee to report on the situation in Britain and Ireland and to discuss future plans.

The president of the committee this year is Juan Fernandez, who was born in Algeria and is a junior police officer in Marseilles. Other leading members are Stevo Demeter, a Rom, who is also a member of the Romany Evangelical Church led by Clement Le Cossec, Leulea Rouda, Vanko's brother who has been working in the movement in West Germany and Jose Santiago, a violinist.

Other members are scattered all over the world and cannot often meet. An international congress of the movement, planned originally for this October has been postponed for six months. We are in touch with Ronald Lee, a leader of the community in Canada living in Montreal, with Jean Dauvergne, in West Germany and others.

The aims of the committee and the twenty branches formed in different countries are to press for the improvement of living conditions for Gypsies and other travellers and to seek United Nation's recognition of their plight, as world-wide problem involving an estimated 12 million people.

The committee in France is at present in the process of applying to the Government for a financial grant to carry out social work. Juan Fernandez believes there is a good chance of obtaining money and this would be a great step forward because in the past what little aid has been given has been channelled through a Government committee, composed, of course, of non-Gypsies.

Internationally, apart from striving for better conditions in each country, the movement is working towards improving the status of Gypsy people (their recognition as a distinct, separate people with their own language and culture) and for the protection of the rights of nomadic groups to continue their way of life - and to have this way of life accommodated by the provision of a network of official camping sites.

As for the future, one of the most promising facts is that in Eastern Europe (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia) large numbers of Gypsies are receiving an education. Even between the wars, many had become educated. It is felt that a new leadership will arise in these countries to add considerable impetus to the movement. But this depends on the continuing improvement of East-West relations and we have to be careful here.

The situation in Britain remains backward because people are living in small, scattered groups, are hardly conscious of their relationship with the larger groups on the Continent and lack educated leaders.

However, this year we have formed a small liaison committee of people who, as friends of Gypsies, want to help unite the different groups and provide outside support. We are having our next meeting during the first weekend in November (probably Sunday, Nov 6) to discuss plans for getting together Gypsies and travellers in the London region, from Birmingham and Leicester and from Kent.

We have been asked by the committee in Paris to help establish an association with Gypsy leaders as soon as possible. As each national association is formed, the United Nations are notified and the Gypsies' case strengthened.

The members of the committee are John Brun, an Austrian who knows many of the travelling people in Scotland and will be travelling about there again next January; Donald Kenrick, who speaks Romenes and was staying with Gypsy friends in Bulgaria last month; Brian Richardson and Bob Eatwell (Brian is an architect and Bob a road engineer), David Smith, a lecturer in education from Leicester who have been concerned with travellers in their areas.

Last year, Brian helped about 35 families in the Bromley area to organise themselves and to press for a site in the area. This eventually led to the allocation of a site at Starr Lane, Bromley, for over 30 families. He is also a member of the Sevenoaks Committee for Gypsy Re-Settlement which now has several Gypsy members including Jasper Smith from the site at Edenbridge.

My wife Venni and I have been living in Ireland for the past five years, three of them with travelling people and Gypsies (there are very few Gypsy families from England and Wales in Ireland now). We brought down the full wrath of the authorities on our heads by helping travelling families to build hut for themselves on waste ground to replace the appalling rag tents many exist in. We were evicted from one site to another with great brutality (I enclose an account of what happened which was produced in France for English-speaking travellers) but eventually established ourselves as squatters on some private ground where 40 families gathered. We built a second school (the first was pulled down and burned by Dublin Corporation) and maintained the settlement for two years in face of all attempts at eviction. The city authorities are now making a site for 40 families nearby and this is going to be ready next spring, we are told.

We have left some form of regional organisation behind in Ireland. In the North, a deputation, led by Isaac Lovell, Arthur Gentle and others, was received at the Northern Ireland House of Commons; in the West, Laurence Ward, for 26 years 'king of the tinkers' is keeping families united and pressing for sites and in Cork another group, composed of travellers and Gypsies is active.

At present we are receiving some guidance from Richard Hauser, at the Centre for Group Studies, and we feel there is much goodwill that could be channelled into something worthwhile. For instance, members of the Gypsy Lore Society might help on the cultural side, making it possible for Gypsy children who are going to school to learn more about their cultural background and so on.

The movement in France has bought a chateau on the Loire and it is hoped next summer to hold an international children's camp there, bringing Gypsy children from several countries together. We hope to take part in this (Venni doing some Montessori work) and to organise a party to go from England and Ireland.

We are in touch with over a hundred groups in Britain and Ireland and to keep in communication with them we are anxious that the association, when it is formed, will be able to produce a monthly newsletter.

This should give you an overall picture of what is happening.

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